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ABSTRACT

Allowing, or encouraging, students to write fiction has not received much attention from college composition teachers, despite recent attempts to bridge the gaps between composition and the study of literature. Based on experiences with a number of students in a variety of writing courses, a college composition instructor questions assumptions about the function of writing underlying higher education writing instruction. One student of the instructor was sullen and uncommunicative in class. However, her journal writing, sometimes fictional, represented thoughtful, varied and complex explorations written in a strong voice. The instructor encouraged the student to continue her fictional journal writings. By the end of the term, the student's formal papers were among the best in the class. A 27-year-old woman who had just returned to college wrote a piece of "fiction" detailing physical and verbal abuse of a wife by her husband. A class discussion (marked by an unusually high level of energy and participation) followed the student's reading of her paper to the class. An experienced composition instructor, participating in a week-long training workshop for first-time graduate student teaching assistants, gave a low mark to an admittedly well written--and, later revealed, an award winning--piece of fiction because it demonstrated no "critical thinking." Students may benefit from writing fiction in the composition class, and teachers may gain perspectives on their roles. (RS)

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Conference on College Composition and Communication Annual Convention, San Diego, March 31-April 3, 1993.

PANEL: Redefining Academic Discourse in the 21st Century: Tradition and the Future of Creative Writing and Composition

SPEAKER 3: Composition As Fiction: Revising the Writing Classroom

Believing with Foucault that we might better understand both our institutions and our individual activities within those institutions by looking with a constantly questioning attitude at the "dispersion" of the elements that make up these structures (the particular in this case being English Departments), I have become interested in the suggestion that the "empty" spaces between the structural elements we see at first glance may well be more important, or more revealing, than the solid "objects" themselves. In other words, why do we tell one "story" and not another when we describe ourselves and our professional endeavors? Any answer will involve multiple dimensions, from the level of the personal to the widest surrounding social contexts. Burton Hatlen, in his "Michel Foucault and the Discourse(s) of English," attempts to start such an evaluation, but he falls into the common habit of focusing all his attention on the already assumed divisions "of knowledge into various pieces of 'turf'" (786), rather than using those relationships as a way to see/probe/fantasize about other possibilities, other modes of relating and being. I propose to attempt such a consideration of one absence in our constructions of composition theory

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and practice: allowing (or encouraging) students to write fiction in the composition course.

Of course, the discussion of any matter of practice such as I have raised here will imediately and necessarily open questions of larger purposes, i.e. theoretical constructions/justifications. It is this awareness, for example, that led C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon to create such a stir with their polemical *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing* (1985), which reflected and contributed to the widespread changes of self-image in the field of Composition Studies about which compositionists prided themselves as effecting a "paradigm shift." However, because all theoretical constructions are always already enmeshed in political, economic, and social structures (which are themselves by definition always already in conflict), as Susan Miller has argued in *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition* (1991), any "solution" to the problems we describe for ourselves will necessarily be incomplete (180). Similarly, any practical application of any theoretical perspective will always be incomplete (and vice versa). But the power that derives from telling a convincing story is really the object of our theoretical competition. Clearly, even the kinds of stories that we can tell are always determined in a never settled struggle over position. Who has "authority" to speak, to write the degree of agency and the particular actions possible to the compositionist and her students? One purpose of this paper is to suggest that other stories are always possible, whether we are speaking of past or present or future constructions of English departments, or past, present, or future constructions of the teaching of rhetoric and writing, or of such shaping of an individual's sense of self as teacher, student, or writer. Any description, any "fiction," is, by definition, fragmentary and highly selective. So, my

purpose is not to offer yet another version to compete for authorization, but to show that any particular construction of what rhetoric/writing is or should be remains always open to readings other than those previously validated by authoritative speakers. For example, composition as the teaching of service skills for the rest of the academy largely dominates the theory and practice of composition as least as far as it is embodied in most colleges and universities. But, even if we were to accept that definition as sufficient theoretically (which I do not), would it necessarily define the particular institutional practices that have been primary to date? (And that is not to even mention whether that service goal would necessarily define particular pedagogical methods.) For example, in many colleges and universities "creative writing" and composition are seen as different worlds (to be kept apart carefully) and even non-fiction narrative by student writers is viewed by some people in authority as largely a waste of time. Yet, nevertheless, composition teachers and theorists have drawn much wider circles (than that service definition) as their field, encompassing such notions as "liberating" pedagogies designed to promote critical thinking and self-awareness and "wholeness as individuals" for students regardless of the life-paths they ultimately choose. With such goals in mind it seems amazing to me that allowing students to write fiction has not received more attention -- as one related tool among many -- especially with the recent attempts to "bridge" the gaps between composition and the study of literature, or, even more, to rethink substantially, in Anne Ruggles Gere's words "... the 'comp-lit' relationship ... [rather] than [just] establishing another span between the two monoliths ..." (Gere 617).

Of course, every college and university has "creative writing" courses which focus on writing fiction, but these are always elective, unlike the

required, almost universal "introductory composition." This separation has at least two noteworthy (and, at first glance, contradictory) effects. One, the relatively small, self-selected student population of "creative writing" courses marks them as somehow special or elite; only the "real writers" or the students "serious about writing" should/will sign up for these courses. This efect hearkens back to romatic mytholgy that "creativity" or "talent" are mysterious, innate, and, ultimately, unteachable. Two, at the same time, the fact that universities require virtually all in-coming students to take composition sends the message that expository or argumentative forms are far more important kinds of writing. Both of these effects are the result of underlying assumptions about the purposes of education, in general, and writing instruction, in particular, which are usually unquestioned. Both the sources and implications of these assumptions deserve much fuller treatment than I have space for in this paper. For now, because of my experiences with students in a variety of expository writing courses over the last seven years, I would argue that such assumptions need to be challenged, at least by such questions as "Who gets to speak?" "What is this writing really for?" and "Who cares about what is written (or not written) in these specialized classroom contexts?" By validating fiction in such sites, we are breaking the limits of traditional academic expectations about the kind of work proper to a "composition" setting. That is, we free the speaking subject to explore herself and her own significance in new ways. For a student writer convinced of her power and ability to make choices, no longer will "that's just the way it happened" suffice as a description of her writing decision processes. Further, such validation changes the nature of "authority" in the classroom. I'm not claiming that widening the kinds of writing students can do in "our"

composition classes will radically alter their relationships with institutions of higher learning, but, at least, such shifts will work toward complicating thier--and our--view that education is largely a matter of certification for the technocratic workforce. The inter-relationships among "fiction," and narrative, and more traditional "composition" genres cannot be fully explored here. In place of such an exploration I will offer a few stories that I think can serve as the beginning of questions about what we do and why we do it in college composition courses.

Marya was sullen and uncommunicative in class. She sat at the back of the class the first day, and when I asked the class to move their desks into a circle, she complied only reluctantly. From that time on, when she showed up to class at all, she would sit as far from me, and from any of the other students for that matter, as she possibly could. Often she would choose a desk outside of the circle altogether and glare at me as if daring me to call her on her resistance.

I persevered in a strategy of attempting to include her in the class discussion and activities as much as possible without ever forcing her involvement. Most days I left feeling that I had failed to connect with her at all, but I didn't know what else to do. My teaching supervisor suggested I insist on participation in a more overtly compliant manner and that if she refused I should remind her of my power to wield grades. Without really knowing why, I resisted that advice and continued to avoid forcing the issue with Marya. She sometimes turned in assignments, though usually a day or two late and always perfunctory in their appearance.

Then, a month into the semester, for the first time I collected the class journals I had assigned (minimum one page per day on any topic in

any form). Marya's journal was one of the biggest surprises I've ever received as a writing instructor. It far exceeded the minimum requirement and the entries were excellent by almost any standard; they were thoughtful, varied, complex explorations written in a strong voice, the expressions of a lively intellect and imagination. Many were no more "polite" or "obedient" than her outward demeanor in class -- but they were always full of involvement and energy, from my point of view the complete opposite of her previous work and behavior. For example, she wrote several narratives about her previous educational experiences which were full of sarcasm and bitterness. To my mind she had been far too well taught that most teachers had no interest in her ideas, experiences, or her values. Adherence to rules for their own sake is the primary lesson most of her education had impressed upon her and she had had enough. As she later explained to me in conference she was bored and thinking about dropping out of school. But luckily for me, she was still reluctant to challenge her parents' expectations that directly, so she was marking time, going to class often enough to keep out of serious problems and trying to get by with the minimum. Also luckily for me, she was in the habit -- an "out of school" habit -- of keeping a regular journal of stories, poems, and reflective pieces both "personal" and "impersonal." Since for her own reasons this was the one class requirement she was already fulfilling, she decided to go ahead and turn it in to me (though with some reluctance, she reported in one entry in which she questioned her wisdom in doing so).

One feature of Marya's journal that particularly interested me was a series of short stories, usually portraying a rather strong-willed, young woman confronting her world. Some of these stories were only identifiable as "fiction" because Marya had labeled them as "story idea" and had given

the protagonists different names and different features. One story, for example, set in the basement "rec. room" of an upper-middle class suburban home, told of a young woman's shy, self-reflective inner dialogue while she exchanges somewhat aggressive verbal banter with a young man with whom she is shooting pool. Other stories were fantasies, a surreal mixture of "real world" elements and "magic" or "horror." In one story, entitled "First Kiss," the central character is a teenage witch who participates in her first human sacrifice (the victim happens to be her high school English teacher). Immediately after this story Marya wrote, "I know this is not what you wanted. I don't care. These are my stories and I'll write what I want."

I responded to that remark in two ways. First, I wrote (on a separate piece of paper, wanting not to track teacherly mud in her journal): "Marya, Your journal is marvelous! More than I ever could have 'wanted.' You're 100% right -- these are your stories and thoughts. Keep it up. Write what you want." Second, I wrote careful reactions and questions to her about her stories from the stance of an involved reader, not as someone pointing out errors. From that point on Marya (albeit not instantaneously) began to warm up to the more public work of the First-Year Composition course, and by the end of the course her formal papers were among the best in the class. I'm not taking credit for that transformation; Marya was a talented, intelligent, young woman, and her progress as a writer was her own doing. But by taking her stories seriously, I was able to offer her a space free enough of "rules for their own sake" to allow her to find her own reasons for working hard at her writing, both her stories and the expository papers I had assigned in class. From that time on I have purposely encouraged students to see writing fiction as one avenue for their intellectual

explorations--because for some it can allow them to imagine a different position for themselves relative to the institutional hierarchies.

Julie was a woman approximately 27 years old who had just returned to college. In my "Composition for Transfer Students" course, she wrote a piece of "fiction" entitled "The Cycle," which details one evening and early the next morning in the lives of a young married couple, both unnamed. The wife is waiting anxiously for her husband to return from work; she has fixed a fancy dinner, imagining their romantic evening together, but he doesn't arrive until long after the dinner is spoiled. He shows up drunk and angry, and uses her as an object for his anger by abusing her both verbally and then physically. He finally leaves her alone and she manages to escape into sleep. In the morning the wife somewhat nervously follows her husband's lead in virtually ignoring the evening's events.

> . . .[W]hen he is ready to go to work, he stands at the door and says, "Come here. I have to get going." I obey him. He puts one arm around me and says, "See ya tonight?" I say, "Sure, I'll cook dinner." Watching from the window, my eyes follow him as he walks to the car. He turns around, as if he knew I was watching, and blows me a kiss. I wonder what I should fix for dinner tonight? (5)

When Julie finished reading her story aloud, even though everyone presumably had already read and written responses about it since she had distributed copies the previous meeting, the class sat in stunned silence. Hearing the woman character's actions and thoughts spoken aloud invested the story temporarily with overwhelming power. After a couple minutes,

the other members of the class joined vigorous discussion. One of the first insistent questions was "Is this a true story?" Or, similarly, "Did this happen to you?" Julie insisted the story is "fiction." Nevertheless there is no questioning that the story is all too true, whether these specific events happened to the author or not. When pressed, Julie went on to tell the class that she had left college at 19 to be married. After several years in an unhappy marriage, she divorced her husband and, in her own words, "wasted another two years in guilt and self-judgment." She then turned back to her writing and claimed that it is only because it is fiction that she was able to write about the subject at all. When asked by a classmate why the characters aren't named, she replied that she couldn't get far enough away from the scene to assign them "made up" names, but at the same time she changed many details of her experience for the sake of "difference" and because she felt her changes would make the story "speak to more people."

Julie clearly is, in some ways, to some degree, characterizing a former self as an object for analysis; the speaking voice of the story thus achieves what Lester Faigley calls an illusory or false "rationality and unity" (411). Faigley's complaint is that such objectification of past "selves" avoids "confronting the contradictions of present experience" (411). On the contrary, I would argue that such an activity can contribute greatly to the writer's ability and desire to confront current contradictions. Furthermore, I would argue that the class as a whole, as a temporary social unit, was stimulated toward exactly that confrontation with the contradictions of present experience on a variety of levels and in a variety of contexts outside that particular class and outside the limits of their "school" lives.

In class Julie's story did speak powerfully to most everyone there, as far as I could tell from the unusually high level of energy and participation

in the ensuing discussion. Discussion ranged over many related issues, starting with somewhat shocked sympathetic reactions. Julie downplayed this tendency by immediately returning the discussion to matters of craft about the story's telling -- both, I would guess, because of her reluctance to directly discuss her experiences and because of her genuine strong desire to make sure the story was as well written as she could make it. Julie and others brought up matters of plot, the tension built in the reader, characterizations, and even some mechanical points. In the context of these comments much of the hour (out of an hour and twenty minute long class) spent discussing Julie's story was spent in interested (and sometimes heated) conversation about gender roles in our society, the psychology of both characters (and especially of the wife) and why they perpetuate their negative relationship as a "cycle," alcoholism and alcohol use/abuse in our society and among college students at this school, and the various forms of abuse that one person can inflict upon another (including, I must mention, one student's half-joking remark about the "violence" of English teachers' grading of papers). The class as a whole felt to me to be one of the best of the term (in the sense I could get of the students investing themselves in the conversation, pursuing particulars of interest to them, and opening new related topics), and I further judged it to be so when three students chose topics raised in the discussion for their next papers.

At a week-long training workshop for English Department graduate students who were soon to be first-time composition teachers (and most with no other training in composition theory or practice), several experienced composition instructors presented a panel discussion on responding to student papers. One of the speakers passed out copies of a

piece of fiction about a young boy's hunting trip with his father. While most of the other experienced teachers on the panel endorsed the paper enthusiastically, one reacted by saying that the best grade she could give it would be a B-, although she acknowledged it was a well written story, because it demonstrated "no critical thinking." In the midst of the heated discussion which ensued, the teacher who included the story for the panel's discussion revealed that it had won a Hopwood Award, a prestigious local short story contest designed to encourage excellence in writing.

I do not include this story to argue that writing teachers should not have differences of opinion about the value of some particular text. Rather, I tell this incident because for me that such a comment could be made on the basis of "critical thinking" (a term, like "literacy" and others used to justify institutional practices, kept carefully and purposefully ambiguous by the multiplicity of its uses by different speakers) highlights the need for constant questioning of our assumptions about educational practices. Universities, English Departments, and individual classrooms exist to serve particular (if, thankfully, often competing) social, political, and cultural aims, and we need at least to be self-conscious about these aims. I find it disturbing that a committed and otherwise thoughtful composition specialist could so easily dismiss "fiction" as a viable avenue towards thinking critically about issues of importance to students and to writing teachers. Time is short, so I cannot marshall extensive student text and theoretical discussion/demonstration in response to this straw-teacher's complaint. But, let me say such evidence would be easy enough to provide given more time to continue my discussion.

For myself, I am committed to the exploration into the possibilities that writing fiction has for our students. Because of my experience of the

benefits such writing can have--sometimes--for students I am not willing to dismiss the writing of fiction as inappropriate for composition classes, and, furthermore, I expect that such exploration of the uses of student fiction will also offer new perspectives on the ways in which composition teachers construct their own roles.